

# The Bottom Line of A.W. Tozer: A Hybrid of Complex Proportions

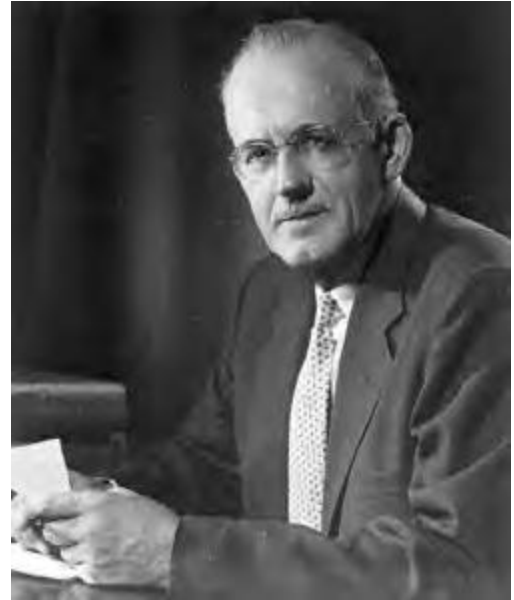
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**By the Editors at Lighthouse Trails**

Over the past several years, a number of our readers have asked us why we have not written about the theologian A.W. Tozer and warned our readers about his often quoting and referencing medieval-period and other mystics (many of them Roman Catholics). Thus, we have known about Tozer's affinity toward the mystics for some time now and have hoped we might someday be able to address this. Partly because it hasn't been evident whether he practiced mystical meditation himself (though he was clearly enamored with the writings of many mystics), we haven't followed through with researching and writing about him. And we also realized that to really write about Tozer would be a huge undertaking for he was somewhat of a complex hybrid (we'll explain what we mean by that later), and it would take a deep dissecting and studying of his works to uncover all the layers. Frankly, we have just not had the time to do it.



However, because Tozer did glean from and favorably point to numerous mystics, we knew we could not recommend his writings or use them in anything we published or carried. That would be especially important for Lighthouse Trails, given that we have had a primary focus for 21 years of warning the church about mystical spirituality entering the church.

It does seem odd to think that a man of such apparent intelligence and spiritual insights in certain areas (as some of our readers and colleagues have pointed out) did not have the discernment to see that these figures (whom he called "the great masters of the deeper life") he was quoting and admiring (such as Meister Eckhart and John of the Cross, who were both panentheists) were indeed mystics and outside the realm of biblical Christianity. And if he *did* realize they were and drew from and pointed his readers to them anyway, then a logical conclusion some might draw would be that he either didn't understand the dangerous and occultic nature of mysticism or he did believe mysticism was acceptable. In an

“authorized biography” titled *The Life of A.W. Tozer*, the author quotes Tozer as saying: “As God’s hungry bee, I’m able to suck nectar out of all sorts of flowers.”<sup>1</sup> One of those from whom he may have drawn “nectar” was the mystic Thomas Merton, with whom he kept “correspondence for some time.”<sup>2</sup> Merton, a universalistic panentheist, believed there was no contradiction between Christianity and Buddhism and said he wanted to be the best Buddhist he could be.<sup>3</sup> While Tozer must have been aware of Merton’s openly professed beliefs, we are not saying that he agreed with him on those points. But his friendship with Merton is just one example of Tozer’s being drawn to the mystics.

In that same biography of Tozer (which was largely a praise for Tozer, not a criticism), the author said:

[Tozer] was a modern mystic who had given priority to the lost art of meditation. . . . Tozer’s hunger for God led him to study the Christian mystics. Their knowledge of God and absorbing love for Him profoundly attracted Tozer. They were spirits kindred to his own. He relentlessly pursued their writings in order to find out for himself what they knew about God and how they came about their knowledge. The way to God was paramount in Tozer’s thinking. He so identified with their struggles and triumphs that people began referring to him, also, as a mystic, a designation to which he never objected. Tozer’s list of these “friends of God” grew with the years, and nothing delighted him more than to uncover a long-forgotten devotional writer. He eagerly introduced these newly discovered mystics to his friends, bringing many of them into public awareness.<sup>4</sup>

## **A Cloak of Obscurity**

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Frankly, Tozer’s writings were often cloaked in obscurity whether he meant for that or not. In *The Pursuit of God* (one of his most popular books, even to this day), he uses terms and phrases that very easily could be taken for those of a mystic (e.g., “all is of God,” “experience of the Divine,” “spiritual realities,” and “manifest Presence”).<sup>5</sup> He uses the word “presence” (referring to God’s presence) dozens of times in *The Pursuit of God*; it is somewhat reminiscent of Sarah Young’s *Jesus Calling* who uses the word “Presence” more than 365 times in her book. Some might defend Tozer and say he was just trying to wake up a

sleeping, dry church of his time and remind Christians of their need for a relationship with Christ. And this may be true; however, it seems that Tozer was swinging like a pendulum between two extremes: a legalistic-type background (i.e., “the holiness movement”)\* and mysticism and couldn’t decide where to land. Perhaps he did not understand the serious ramifications of both extremes. The many extremes in the church presently are constantly pulling Christians away from truth, not toward it. Unfortunately, Tozer is one of the main men whose mystical interests and public praises have been used to bring about a massive mystical movement in today’s church.

Tozer seemed to have an insatiable thirst for what he called “the deeper life”<sup>6</sup> (or what he also called “holy mysteries”<sup>7</sup>) with God; and as the preface of his book *The Pursuit of God* clearly shows, he believed that:

The Bible is not an end in itself, but a means to bring men to an intimate and satisfying knowledge of God, that they may enter into Him, that they may delight in His Presence, may taste and know the inner sweetness of the very God Himself in the core and center of their hearts.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, he seems to have spent much of his life seeking after experiences that would give him this deeper life he so sought. He says, “Others before me have gone much farther into these holy mysteries than I have done.”<sup>9</sup> (We must assume that he is referring, at least in part, to the mystics he admits to glean from.) In studying the contemplatives and mystics as we have for so many years, we have found this to be a common thread among them (and it appears some of this rubbed off on Tozer). It’s a kind of *always seeking but never finding*, a searching for something that is never really attained; so the searching always goes on. And as some of you may remember reading in our materials, it was Thomas Merton who likened the contemplative mystical prayer experience to an LSD trip.<sup>10</sup> He was comparing it favorably, but he was obviously wrong. With the drug trip, there is a feeling of almost reaching full truth and light but never completely grasping it (thus, it’s spiritually addictive nature); and with the contemplative prayer experience, the same thing happens (thus, the spiritually addictive nature to it as well). Always searching, but never finding. It may very well be that Tozer was in this state (at least to some degree) of always searching for that still deeper life. He certainly would have read about it many times as he read the mystics for this is what they are always after.

We know of a number of solid discernment ministries that quote and reference Tozer. We've seen his name favorably referenced in many good books on truth. This article is not in any way intended to criticize or judge that. Our motivation in writing this article is because we also know that many in the emergent/contemplative/progressive camp have quoted and referenced Tozer as well and with damaging results. Perhaps what has happened here is that people read Tozer through the filter of their own minds and spirituality. For those who are solid believers in Christ and His Word, they read the words of Tozer where he encourages the relationship with Christ, prayer, and to walk faithfully as His disciples. For the emergent/progressive person or one leaning toward mysticism, Tozer gives them the "proof" that they are going in the right direction. His obscurity has apparently produced many various "fruits." Worth noting, Tozer was a key figure and influence in the Christian & Missionary Alliance and was an ordained minister in that denomination. That denomination was also one of the first ones to go contemplative (very likely, at least in part, because of Tozer's influence). Whether Tozer meant it or not, he (along with others) provided growing soil, if you will, for the contemplative prayer movement to take root and flourish in the evangelical church.

As for our referring to Tozer as a Christian hybrid, we have observed over the years ministers and teachers who appear to be Christian (and we believe some of them genuinely to be Christian, including Tozer), but they have tainted themselves (and their followers) with harmful practices, teachings, connections, and promotions\*\* that hinder rather than enhance one's relationship with God. Hence, the term we use in referring to them as "bridgers"<sup>11</sup> whose teachings and practices have the potential of drawing people into the mystical, the New Age, or an unscriptural belief system, whether they always mean to or not.

## **A Book About Tozer's Mysticism**

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In 1980, a woman named Eleanor K. Harris wrote a dissertation/thesis for New York University titled, "The Thought of Aiden Wilson Tozer: An Analysis and Appraisal with Special Emphasis on His Mysticism and Conceptual Approach to the World." Harris, herself, was an advocate for mysticism as exhibited in the acknowledgments of the report where she thanks her mother for "first introducing her to the mystical mode of consciousness."<sup>12</sup> Regarding her report, she says:

The purpose of this research is the examination of a twentieth century figure [A.W. Tozer] operating within a very conservative segment of Protestantism who was influenced by mystical prayer."<sup>13</sup>

One of the pieces of information in Harris' research report (on page 229) is a letter she received, during her research for the book, from David Fant. Fant was the author of a biography about Tozer titled *A Twentieth-century Prophet*. There is an Addendum in his book titled "Dr. Tozer's Recommended Books" where nearly three dozen books that Tozer read and recommended are listed. In the letter to Harris from Fant, he stated:

The recommended books listed on Page 180 of the biography was prepared by Dr. Tozer himself as a result of many inquiries. There was a copy of each in his personal library.<sup>14</sup>

Tozer's recommended reading list included a who's who of medieval mystics such as: St. John of the Cross (*Dark Night of the Soul*), an anonymous monk (*The Cloud of Unknowing*), Bernard of Clairvaux, Julian of Norwich, Meister Eckhart, Thomas Kelly, Brother Lawrence (*Practicing the Presence of God*), Michael (Miguel) Molinos, Jacob Boehme, Richard Rolle, and Francis de Sales to name about one third of the listed names. Incidentally, many of these names Tozer recommended in this list are in Chris Lawson's *Directory of Authors (Three Not Recommended Lists)* booklet.<sup>15</sup>

Of Tozer's list of recommended books, Fant says that listing them didn't mean that Tozer "put his stamp of approval" on all the content of each book and said, "if any doctrinal defects should appear these would be far overbalanced by the spiritual verities." That's not much of a disclaimer because the doctrinal "defects" of these mystics are not at all overbalanced by their spiritual benefits. The opposite is true: these "defects" far outweigh any spiritual benefits.

## ***The Cloud and Contemplative Prayer***

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Taking just one example, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Ray Yungen explains:

[*The Cloud of Unknowing*] is essentially a manual on contemplative prayer inviting a beginner to:

“Take just a little word, of one syllable rather than of two . . . With this word you are to strike down every kind of thought under the cloud of forgetting.”

The premise here is that in order to really know God, mysticism must be practiced—the mind has to be shut down or turned off so that the cloud of unknowing where the presence of God awaits can be experienced.<sup>16</sup>

For those who may not be familiar with the term “contemplative prayer/meditation,” this small quote from *The Cloud of Unknowing* describes the essence of contemplative prayer: a word or phrase is repeated (or the breath is focused on) for several minutes, which is said to put the mind into a neutral state in order for the practitioner to shut out mental distractions and to hear the voice of God and feel at one with Him. The root belief of this practice is that God is *in* all people, and as contemplatives teach, *anyone* can practice contemplative meditation and get results because it has nothing to do with doctrine or belief in God but rather a spiritual realm that is reached in an altered state of consciousness. Proclaiming Christians who practice this say it is different than Eastern meditation which tries to *empty* the mind, and Christian contemplatives saying they are *filling* their mind, not emptying it. But regardless if the intent is different, contemplative prayer is the same as Eastern-style or New Age meditation. If what we are saying is true, then contemplative prayer is an occultic practice just

as it is in the Eastern or New Age camp. A quote by mystic Richard Kirby, author of *Mission of Mysticism* (taken from Yungen's book *A Time of Departing*), is haunting:

The meditation of advanced occultists is identical with the prayer of advanced mystics: it is no accident that both traditions use the same word for the highest reaches of their respective activities—contemplation.<sup>17</sup>

While there are undoubtedly many since Tozer's death in 1963 who have analyzed (both praiseful and critical) his teachings and beliefs, it is not the intent of this article to do a full examination. But it is our intent to issue a warning that while many may have benefited from his writings, we will never know how many went into mystical spirituality because of Tozer's quest for a "deeper life" that involved (at least to some degree) the teachings and beliefs of the mystics.

One of Tozer's main messages in his life was clearly how to discover and obtain *the deeper things of God*. The contemplative mystic would argue that you can't *really* be deep with God and intimate with God without mystical experiences. Yungen explains this:

Contemplative advocates propose that something vital and important has been missing from the church for centuries. The insinuation is that Christians have been lacking something necessary for their spiritual vitality; but that would mean the Holy Spirit has not been fully effective for hundreds of years and only now the secret key has been found that unlocks God's full power to know Him. These proponents believe that Christianity has been seriously crippled without this extra ingredient. This kind of thinking leads one to believe that traditional, biblical Christianity is merely a philosophy without the contemplative prayer element. Contemplatives are making a distinction between studying and meditating on the Word of God versus *experiencing* Him, suggesting that we cannot hear Him or *really* know Him simply by studying His Word or even through normal prayer—we must be contemplative to accomplish this. But the Bible makes it clear that the Word of God is living and active and has always been that way, and it is in filling our minds with it that we come to love Him, not through a mystical practice.<sup>18</sup>

## The Bottom Line

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The bottom line with Tozer and his writings, from the standpoint of this article, is this:

- Many fine upstanding and devoted Christians have testified that they have been greatly blessed by Tozer's writings.
- There is ample evidence from his writings that he was a true believer in Christ and believed in salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.
- It appears that other than vague references, he never came out and gave specific instruction on how to practice mantra meditation.
- He unfortunately did not exhibit discernment when it came to understanding or expressing the dangers of mysticism and the mystics who promoted it.



- His favorable referencing to and quoting of numerous mystics (many of whom were panentheistic) and their beliefs has been utilized by those in today's church who promote and advocate for contemplative spirituality (i.e., mystical spirituality).

## Conclusion

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In Tozer's own writings, and in the biographies written about him, the words "mystics," "mystical," and "mysticism" are treated as if they are everyday terms the Christian can and should utilize.\*\*\* And with today's contemplative prayer movement's energizing force being that of mystical meditation, Tozer's use of the words and the words commonly associated with him makes him a poster child for today's contemplative prayer movement.

Tozer's writings and his affinity with the writings of mystics and the influence they had on him can only be expected to lead some of his readers into the same endless experiential search for a "deeper" truth. But the "deepest" truth can only be resolved and settled by being rooted in the simplicity of the Gospel where, "Therefore being justified by faith, we have *peace* with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1, emphasis added). The word "peace" here indicates a settled condition in the believer's heart where "ever learning [striving], and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 3:7) is no longer the condition of the believer's heart. Thus, while a discerning Christian may be able to distinguish and compartmentalize Tozer's good and bad, too many Christians today do not exhibit that level of discernment or already have an affinity toward contemplative mysticism, and reading Tozer could lead such undiscerning (or contemplative-leaning) Christians in the wrong direction.

Harry Ironside warned about the dangers of mixing truth with error:

Error is like leaven of which we read, "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump" (Galatians 5:9). Truth mixed with error is equivalent to all error, except that it is more innocent looking and, therefore, more dangerous.<sup>19</sup>

The Bible is clear that we, as believers in Christ, are to be discerning and never to allow the enemy a foothold through deceptive means. May we strive to walk in the simplicity of Christ and His Gospel, to hide His Word in our hearts, and to serve Him with a good conscience and a pure heart that others may see the truth and turn to Christ.

For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world, and more abundantly to you-ward. (2 Corinthians 1:12)

But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. (2 Corinthians 11:3)

## Endnotes

1. James Snyder, *The Life of A.W. Tozer* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers (division of Baker Publishing), pp. 191-192.
2. Ibid.
3. David Steindl-Rast, "Recollection of Thomas Merton's Last Days in the West" (Monastic Studies, 7:10, 1969).
4. James Snyder, *The Life of A.W. Tozer*, op. cit., pp. 17-18.
5. A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Camphill, PA: Christian Publications, 1982 edition), p. 8-13.
6. Such as in his book, *Keys to the Deeper Life* and often used in his other writings.
7. A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, 1982 edition, op. cit., p. 10.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. A statement by Matthew Fox who was quoting Thomas Merton from a statement Merton told him in 1967; <http://web.archive.org/web/20060425035122/nineoclockservice.tripod.com/mattiefx.htm>.
11. A term coined by former radio host, Ingrid Schleuter.
12. Eleanor K. Harris, "The Thought of Aiden Wilson Tozer: An Analysis and Appraisal with Special Emphasis on His Mysticism and Conceptual Approach to the World" (1980), p. iii; from a purchased PDF by Lighthouse Trails.

13. Ibid, p. 4
14. David Fant, A.W. Tozer, *A Twentieth-Century Prophet* (Chicago, IL: Wingspread Publishers; an imprint of Moody Publishers, 2010 edition, originally published in 1964 by Christian Publications), p. 229, Appendix B.
15. Chris Lawson, *Directory of Authors (Three Not Recommended Lists)* (Lighthouse Trails booklet).
16. Ray Yungen, *A Time of Departing* (Roseburg, OR: Lighthouse Trails Publishing, 2006 second edition), p. 33.
17. Richard Kirby, *The Mission of Mysticism* (London, UK: SPCK, 1979), cited in *A Time of Departing*, p. 32.
18. Ray Yungen, "Christianity Is Missing Out on Something Vital – Is This True?" (<https://www.lighthouse Trails research.com/blog/christianity-is-missing-out-on-something-vital-is-this-true/>).
19. Harry Ironside, "Should Christians Expose Error?" (<https://www.lighthouse Trails research.com/blog/should-christians-expose-error-2/>).

\*The Christian & Missionary Alliance was a "holiness movement" denomination (of which Tozer was an ordained minister)

\*\*Not guilt by association but rather guilt by proxy or promotion.

\*\*\*See Yungen's article, "Does God Sanction Mystical Experiences?" (<https://www.lighthouse Trails research.com/blog/does-god-sanction-mystical-experiences/>)

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